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NSC BRIEFING

3 August 1954

PRE-ELECTION TENSION MOUNTS IN SYRIA

(not used)

I. Summary

A. Political confusion, labor unrest and campaign violence

harass weak, neutral cabinet on eve of important 20 August
parliamentary elections.

B. Possible developments: disorderly elections producing

weak, coalition government; or postponement of elections;
and for military intervention.

C. Elections are important because may determine whether:

(1) civilians or military rule;

(2) Syria lines up with Iraq or Egyptian-Saudi Arabian

Axis. Lining up with axis bad for Turk-Pakistani pact.

II. The Situation

A. Political Confusion

1. Major old-line parties--Nationalist and Populist--

ineffectual:

a. Populists may boycott elections, allegedly because

of army interference.

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2. Old-line ineffectiveness throws field wide open to radicals and small parties.

a. Strengthens extremist Arab Socialist-Resurrectionist Party (ASR), led by leftist Akram Hawrani and supported by large military group.

b. Communists calling for "national front" with ASR and other "progressives."

c. Ex-dictator Shishakli's Arab Liberation Movement also running candidates.

d. Labor, emerging slowly as political force, will run some nominees.

B. Labor Unrest

1. General strike has just been averted but unrest continues.

2. Judges, demanding higher salaries, on strike; expected to be joined by lawyers, civil servants.

N.B. Judges vital to electoral machinery. If their strikes continues, possible postponement of elections.

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3. Security, police forces, asking pay increase, reportedly ready to strike.

C. Campaign Violence

1. Armed clashes between partisans occur regularly.
2. Cabinet has banned public meetings; requested firearms be temporarily handed over to government.

D. Conclusion: Six-man nonpolitical cabinet under Prime Minister al Ghazzi harassed.

1. Pressure groups taking advantage of cabinet weakness to achieve special demands or control of electoral machinery.
2. Judges' strike precipitated minor cabinet crisis solved by president's intervention.
3. Parliament may have to be reconvened to settle strike.

III. Expectations: Three Possibilities in order of probability:

A. Very weak government.

1. Elections, if held, promise to be disorderly.

2

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2. Whatever the party decisions and alignments on election day, every indication Syria will get weak, probably coalition, civilian government.
3. Extremist, anti-Western elements alone can profit from present instability.

B. Postponement of Elections

1. Likely, if strike not settled.
2. Consequently, hard to predict exact form of resulting chaos.

C. Military Intervention

1. No evidence of immediate action, but
2. Syrian army has tradition of interference in politics.
3. Assistant Chief of Staff Malki has strongly hinted readiness to act.
4. Hawrani, of whom Malki is follower, reported few months ago planning coup before elections.

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IV. Elections are Important Because: May Determine:

A. Whether civilians can run parliamentary government in Syria or whether another military dictatorship under someone like Colonel Shishakli is in the offing.

B. Whether preference in Syria is pro-Iraqi or pro-Egyptian-and-Saudi-Arabian. If latter, as likely, balance of power in Arab world will be against Iraq-now anxious for Arab support for joining Turk-Pakistani pact.

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5
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